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Consideration and adoption of the report of the Committee to the General Assembly at its sixtieth session

Draft report

Chapter III

General debate

1. Statements in the general debate were made by the following States members of the Committee on Information: Algeria, Angola, Argentina (on behalf of the Rio Group), Bangladesh, Belarus, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Iceland, India, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Jamaica (on behalf of the Group of 77 and China), Japan, Luxembourg (on behalf of the European Union), Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Switzerland, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Russian Federation, the United Republic of Tanzania, the United States of America, Trinidad and Tobago (on behalf of the Caribbean Community), Tunisia, Ukraine and Yemen. Statements were also made by two observers: Sao Tome and Principe (on behalf of the Community of Portuguese-speaking countries — CPLP) and Palestine.

2. The general debate was preceded by statements made by the Chairman of the Committee and the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Department of Public Information.

3. In taking up the substantive questions before the Committee, speakers emphasized the central role of the United Nations in global affairs and of the Department of Public Information as its public voice. One speaker, speaking on behalf of a large group, noted that the Department had an indispensable role in promoting a positive public image of the United Nations. The work of the Department in this area should continue to be carried out in all Member States, particularly in the media of the host country. Reiterating the importance of the Department's role in providing "accurate, impartial, comprehensive and timely information", the speaker urged that there be a consistent message between the Department and any other entities that provided public information material on the United Nations.

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4. Another speaker, also representing a large group, commended the Department for its efforts to meet the various challenges it faced in 2004, and also for its efforts to develop a more strategic approach to promoting global awareness and greater understanding of the work of the United Nations in priority areas. In particular, the group welcomed the Department's approach to focus on key messages as part of a coordinated communications strategy.

5. Referring to the Department's role in promoting a positive public image of the United Nations, one speaker, who spoke on behalf of a large group, noted that the Department had to expend considerable resources to counter negative publicity in the media about the United Nations. While the Organization should not be shielded from justified criticism, it was regrettable that this type of publicity had overshadowed the other areas of work of the United Nations. "The United Nations is on many occasions not given due credit for its work", another speaker observed. One speaker, referring to the Organization's "mixed image", said that the Department had been countering the negative publicity "valiantly and creatively", but there was no way for the Department to match the market reach of the conglomeration of modern media. He noted that the Member States should recognize that the United Nations took a lot of criticism that it did not deserve, "either owing to wrong expectations being placed on it by the public at large, and often by Member States too, or owing to outright attacks against the United Nations".

6. Several speakers underscored the importance of the sixtieth anniversary of the Organization and the High Level Summit in September 2005. A speaker, representing a large group, underlined the importance of coordinated activities in connection with the Summit, which he felt should encompass strong support for, and the widest possible cooperation with, the national public awareness campaigns conducted by the Member States with a view to bringing to the people better knowledge of United Nations activities and achievements. Another speaker, also representing a large group, agreed with the observation of the Secretary-General that the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary would be a time of reflection and renewal, which presented the Department with an excellent opportunity to tell the United Nations story in a more dynamic way.

7. A number of speakers noted the importance they attached to the commemoration of World Press Freedom Day (3 May), which in 2005 would be observed outside the framework of the annual session of the Committee on Information. According to one speaker, a free press was fundamental for true democracy, and it was important to recall the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' affirmation in article 19 that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". Another speaker emphasized that freedom of the press was closely linked to sustainable economic and social development, which was a valuable tool to ensure the exercise of the fundamental rights and liberties. Another speaker, representing a large group, noted with concern that in many countries freedom of the press did not exist and that the dissemination of information remained controlled and limited. However, another speaker noted that information often "failed in its intrinsic duty" and was abused for "infringement of sovereignty".

8. Referring to reform in the Department of Public Information, a speaker noted that, as a result of the reorientation process initiated in 2002, a transformed Department had emerged, which was serving the rest of the United Nations system well. Another speaker expressed satisfaction with the Department's new operating model and the further integration of new information and communications technologies into its global communications infrastructure. Another speaker described the Department as a "model department" that had shown an "exemplary ability to cater to the very varied needs of its clients".

9. Agreeing that the reorientation process of the Department was complete, one speaker suggested that the Department should continue to integrate the culture of evaluation into all its future plans and programmes and review the quality of its products and services. Another speaker, speaking on behalf of a large group, stressed that self-evaluation and performance management were essential for the success of a large and complex organization such as the Department. The speaker, who pointed out that 80 per cent of the Department's target audiences had expressed satisfaction in terms of the usefulness, relevance and quality of its products, services and activities, encouraged the Department to further deepen the culture of evaluation in every aspect of its activities.

10. Several speakers referred to the growing digital divide between developed and developing countries and called for greater efforts by the international community and the Department of Public Information to close that gap. As a result of the widening gap, vast segments of the population in developing countries were not benefiting from the present information and communications technology revolution, another speaker noted. A number of speakers also referred to the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (Tunis, 16-18 November 2005). According to one speaker, who addressed the meeting on behalf of a large group, the outcome of this Summit should provide for specific initiatives to be taken at all levels to assist in bridging the digital divide, as well as place information and communications technologies in the service of development. The speaker urged the Department to continue to promote the Summit as an important international event.

11. Several speakers welcomed the Department's efforts to promote the "dialogue among civilizations and cultures" and commended the Department for launching its "unlearning intolerance" seminar series, which has so far included a seminar on anti-Semitism, and another on Islamophobia. According to one speaker, the seminar on anti-Semitism was "a very good step towards a situation where Jews everywhere feel that the United Nations is their home too". Another speaker asked the Department to explore different ways and means, including utilizing the potentials and capacities of United Nations information centres in different regions and countries for promoting the culture of dialogue, respect and understanding among people. Another speaker spoke appreciatively of the annual seminar organized by the Department on the question of Palestine, which this year will take place in Cairo, Egypt (13-14 June 2005).

12. Several speakers singled out the Department's website as an important source of information about the United Nations. One speaker described the United Nations website as "exceedingly effective, useful and well-organized". Another speaker, speaking on behalf of a large group, expressed support for the efforts made by the Department in strengthening the United Nations website in all official languages. The main objective of the Department, the speaker said, should be the attainment of

parity of all the official languages on the website. Expressing the group's concern at the continuing disparity among the different official languages on the United Nations website, the speaker urged that all efforts be directed towards addressing this issue. These efforts should conform with relevant General Assembly resolutions through the reallocation of resources and the deployment of staff to the required language posts, the speaker said. Several speakers also underscored the importance of providing information in local languages and commended the network of United Nations information centres for their efforts to develop websites that catered to the needs of local populations in developing countries.

13. Another speaker, also speaking on behalf of a large group, welcomed the Department's efforts to further attract website users through a redesign of the site's top level pages, including database-driven features for an easy access to the latest development. The speaker particularly welcomed the increasing compliance with the requirements for persons with disabilities. However, another speaker asked the Department to provide additional information on accessibility by persons with disabilities and on the status of the project to establish a United Nations portal. The speaker, while noting the growth of the overall number of pages viewed on the website, also asked the Department to provide a statistical analysis of the number of pages actually viewed, sorted by official languages, and not just "percentage" increases in the number of pages viewed across language sites.

14. At the same time, several speakers called for the continuation of the use of traditional media, including radio and print, in disseminating the main messages of the United Nations. One speaker, noting the Department's continued progress towards strengthening partnership with radio and television broadcasters, commended the Department for launching a new radio programme dedicated to Africa.

15. A number of speakers commented on the importance of closer coordination between the Department of Public Information and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. Speaking on behalf of a large group, one speaker observed that such coordination was essential in ensuring effectiveness of the information components in peacekeeping missions. This was of current relevance to the international community in the context of the surge in peacekeeping operations and allegations of abuse and exploitation in peacekeeping missions. The speaker requested the Department of Public Information to provide specific information ensuring that the activities undertaken by the information components in peacekeeping missions were under the financial responsibility of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. Another speaker felt that the peacekeepers' job was greatly facilitated when local communities were aware of the benefits a peacekeeping operation brought to them. The Department of Public Information and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations should fruitfully collaborate to ensure that the objectives of the peacekeeping operations were well known to the communities they were set up to secure, he said.

16. The new strategic directions taken by United Nations libraries were commented on by several speakers. One speaker, addressing on behalf of a large group, noted that any change to the methods of United Nations libraries should continue to respect the previously agreed mandate and General Assembly resolutions relevant to libraries, as well as be subject to prior intergovernmental discussion and agreement. The speaker also cautioned that the proposal for

technological innovations for the provision of library services should take into account the physical and other challenges faced by Member States in being able to effectively utilize such technology. Echoing the same view, another speaker noted that what made a library a living experience was the presence of print products, including books, newspapers and other publications. The speaker hoped that United Nations libraries would not abandon their traditional role.

17. However, other speakers welcomed the proposed changes in library services and said they supported the newly developed motto "from collections to connections". One speaker expressed the confidence that the new model would enhance the important role librarians play as they would be positioned to better assist their clients or partners in finding relevant, authoritative and up-to-date information.

18. A central focus of the general debate was the report of the Secretary-General on the further rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres. According to one speaker representing a large group, the report of the Secretary-General had provided an assessment of lessons learned from the proposed regional model. Based on this, the group endorsed the conclusions that no further regionalization was possible. The speaker reiterated the group's view that the presence of United Nations information centres in developing countries, in particular the least developing countries, strengthened the flow of information in these countries and assisted in addressing the disparities faced by them in the areas of access to information and information technology. The speaker, underlining the view of the group, stressed that any proposal for the further rationalization of the network of these centres must be in close consultation with the host countries, other countries served by these information centres as well as the regions involved, and must take into account the geographical, linguistic and technological characteristics of different regions. In addition, adequate resources should be allocated so as to ensure the effective functioning and strengthening of United Nations information centres in developing countries.

19. Another speaker, also representing a large group, expressed the hope that the new report of the Secretary-General was not a preparatory measure to resume in the future the process of rationalization or closure of United Nations information centres. "The regionalization process is over", the speaker observed. Another speaker, expressing support for the proposal that Governments provide rent-free premises or rent-subsidized premises, underlined that any proposal for further rationalization, which could include the closure of United Nations information centres in the event these conditions could not be met, "must necessarily be in consultation with the host countries, other countries served by these information centres, as well as regions involved, taking into account the distinct characteristics of each region".

20. Presenting a different view on the process of rationalization of United Nations information centres, one speaker representing a large group reiterated that the policy of the European Union with regard to regionalization of United Nations information centres had not changed. They accepted the argument that the pursuit of regionalization must be tailored to the circumstances in each region and the Western European model would not be applicable to all regions. They also agreed that there could be "certain advantage in taking a more gradual approach on this subject for the time being". However, a gradual approach "must not mean a static one", the

speaker said. The countries in Western Europe had agreed to close down centres in their capitals on the understanding that other Member States would also take a similar decision in their own countries if circumstances warranted it. Restating their commitment to regionalization, the speaker asked the Secretariat to "use fully the authority they have in making executive decisions on where best to focus their efforts" and advised them to make "bold proposals" for the approval of the General Assembly.

21. Another speaker, who commended the Department for taking steps with a view to strengthening the centres' operations, argued that for a variety of reasons, the information centre system continued to need further rationalization. He said he was not convinced that the regionalization/rationalization process would have continued to move forward to the extent necessary to effect real change even if the United Nations information centre budget had not been cut. The speaker reminded the Committee that the decision to reduce the budgetary allocation to United Nations information centres had been "willingly agreed by all".

22. Another speaker argued that the rationalization process should not automatically be understood as a reduction in the number of centres, but rather as an improvement to promote a more systematic and effective flow of information and more active outreach activities. The priorities of rationalization should be determined primarily on the basis of demand for the services provided by United Nations information centres and the availability of alternative means of access to United Nations information services. The speaker reminded the Committee that currently about one fourth of United Nations Member States were outside of the scope of the Department's field information capacity, and hoped that the rationalization of United Nations information centres would proceed in such a way as to strengthen the Organization's information outreach to those Member States currently remaining outside of the scope.

23. The Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information provided an in-depth response to a wide range of questions raised by delegations during the general debate, on 20 April 2005.